

"To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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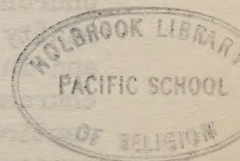
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A Basic Philosophy for Promoting Cooperation Among Rural Churches

By Mark Rich*



The movement toward closer cooperation among country churches has two phases, the one positive and dynamic in which the cooperation is by purpose and through conviction, and, the other a cooperation of convenience or compulsion of outward circumstances. This second type of cooperation, which more properly might be called adjustment, while achieving some necessary changes in approach, has in it a deteriorating element. For instance, a rural pastor said, "I'm as conservative as they make them, but here are these people of other denominations in the community. We need their support. They won't become Baptists. Therefore, I'm working for associate membership."

Such opening of denominational doors will probably achieve a good purpose despite the handicap with which it is achieved. The handicap is evident. This pastor votes for associate membership but he does not, at heart, believe in interdenominational cooperation. He wants associate membership for the purpose of giving strength in finances and in numbers. Under other circumstances he might even oppose cooperation. But, he is never averse to having members of other denominations come to his church. A religion of convenience will not bring much spiritual character to the American countryside.

The community church movement, heralded as the step necessary to redeem rural communities from the worst curses of sectarianism, has some disappointing aspects. It has so frequently failed to achieve its high purpose, not because there is no need for a community-serving and a community-uniting church, but because too often the community church has had no distinctive philosophy. It has with a sectarian philosophy tried to be a community church. In that it has not succeeded. Nor can it succeed. How can an automobile run on hay or a horse on gasoline, or a church without dynamic for its particular task and organization?

This has been said to make clear that if cooperation among rural churches is to be effective, it must be dynamic and positive. Back of every religious movement there must be a driving, motivating idea or philosophy. If that philosophy is concrete, definite and dynamic, the movement has a chance for success. If cooperation is only a convenience or practical expedient, we

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need not interest ourselves in it. Let it be repeated, cooperation can only redeem the community when it is dynamic. It can be dynamic only as it grows out of convictions and a fundamental philosophy. The purpose of this paper is to state convictions essential to a philosophy of cooperation.

But before going further we should have an understanding of the meaning of cooperation. In many circles cooperation is always interpreted as organic unity. That is not our conception. Cooperation is "working together for the same end." If churches are to cooperate there must be more than one church to cooperate. We shall assume that Christian churches in a rural community have a common goal which is to bring in the Kingdom of God in the world and in the community. If that is so, there must be a degree to which the churches can work together in achieving this end, however diverse their conception of that end may be. But, since most churches have somewhat similar conceptions of their functions, it would seem that in many things they may work together. This working together we call cooperation.

I

The first reason for a basic faith in cooperation is found in the needs and opportunities which face the rural church. The needs are so many, so widespread and so obvious that there is no necessity here to recite them. The opportunities are so numerous that it requires little stretching of the imagination to see them.

Two things may be said about these needs and opportunities. First, they are human needs and opportunities. They are not denominational or sectarian. The four cursing young garage men in a Nebraska town did not have a Baptist need. Their spiritual shortcomings were deprivations of the soul. The valley peopled with professedly godless families from a foreign country does not represent a Methodist or a Congregational need. The need is common to any people anywhere who are blind to God and his purposes. Surely, the children whose parents never teach them the fundamentals of the Christian faith, families the center of whose living is not spiritual, communities that are wasting away in the doldrums, cannot be said to have denominational needs. Something about human needs and misery defies classification into sectarian categories.

Moreover, many needs cannot be met by individual church action. A community is harassed by taverns and road-houses. One of the five churches working independently is helpless to face that threat to community sobriety. There are in the community a dozen agencies ranging from the parent-teacher association, through the Grange to the community improvement society. In some matters these organizations need to work with the church. But, one church out of six cannot successfully enlist their cooperation. The new central high school will seldom cooperate with one of several churches. A rigidly denominational church in a rural community of heterogeneous religious composition cannot serve all the people. The exodus of youth from the rural community, leaving a scattering of young adults, presents a situation in which any one of several churches cannot by itself enlist their support and meet their need. You two little struggling churches in dust-swept Easkan. How can you working alone support a leader? How can you remove the ugliness which stalks in your town which stands like a ghost come back to life? How can you create bonds of Christian fellowship when in all things you stand aloof from one another? You

which believe in competition, struggle for existence and survival of the fittest. But the church was made to express cooperation. Every vital church does so within itself. Every church by its very nature must practice the principle of mutual aid with the churches. The church was not made to fight its kind, to compete in a death struggle, but to work together for good, and for the Kingdom of God.

IV

A fourth support for a philosophy of inter-church cooperation is found in the teachings of Jesus. Jesus repudiated completely the religion of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. There is no rule of the jungle in his spiritual standards. Instead he announced a doctrine of love which replaces revenge. Love, which is active goodwill, is the highest expression of the spiritual life. He exemplifies this spirit in his attitude toward the woman at the Samaritan well and toward the stranger who in his name was casting out demons. He talked about love as an active agent in man's relation to God, in man's relation to man. Goodwill, mutual aid and cooperation are expressions of the godly life.

Three emphases may be noted in Jesus' teachings. First is its inclusiveness. "Come, follow me," he said. Requirements which many churches set for membership are not to be found in Jesus' teachings. When a young woman from the English branch of one of the denominations married a young man from the German branch, there was long hesitancy in the German church about giving her membership, although her church record was unimpeachable. Exclusiveness leads to rivalry and competition. Jesus said, "If you love God, come follow." He did not take an exclusive attitude then. He would not take it now.

A second emphasis is upon diversity. Among the early followers of Jesus there was a wide variety of background, experience and point of view. Jesus did not discourage that. When Paul in a priceless simile likens the perfect relation between Christians to the cooperative relation between the diverse parts of a human body he develops ideas found in the teachings of his Master.

Third is the aspect of unity. Jesus prayed that his disciples, with all their diversities and idiosyncracies, might all be one. Certainly he was not speaking about church union for there were no churches to unite. He referred to an abiding spirit of goodwill between his followers, such a spirit of unity and good cheer as was experienced by the expectant Jerusalem church. To try through proof texts or otherwise to prove that Jesus advocated divisiveness is to ignore the central emphases of his concept of the Kingdom of God.

One of Jesus' similes which embodies these three teachings on cooperative relations is found in John XIV. His simple words are, "I am the vine; ye are the branches." There we have a picture of relations within an individual church or between churches. At the center is a trunk which is God and Christ. Gathered unto it are branches (his followers) of diverse forms, each branch expressing itself according to its nature and relation to the trunk. No two leaves are alike. Yet the tree is a unity because in its diversity each branch and root find a central unifying force in the trunk.

An experience of my boyhood days has helped me to understand this

This philosophy is expressed in various ways. It may take the form of a creed of racial superiority and a practice of racial domination. Or it may express itself in nationalism which reaches such heat of conflict that the world becomes a slaughter-house. Among the churches of a local community it leads to distrust, a constant eye for the vulnerable spot in the other churches, a sort of glee when the other churches weaken to the advantage of the superior church. Each church goes toward its goal with one eye on the other churches, resulting in a biased course which sometimes leads to collisions. Not a few churches placidly assume that they are divinely appointed to consume all the other churches, and any signs of weakening in the other churches are interpreted as evidence of the ill favor of the Almighty and any increase of their own strength is direct evidence of heavenly favor.

Thousands of churches hold to the principle of elimination or survival of the fittest. But such a theory is hardly satisfactory for a Christian church. We can find, even in nature, a superior principle.

Prince Kropotkin has ably pointed out ⁽¹⁾ that Darwin saw cooperation replace the struggle for existence in numberless animal societies, which substitution resulted in the development of moral and intellectual faculties which secured to the species the best conditions for survival. "He (Darwin) intimated that in such cases the fittest were not the physically strongest, nor the cunningest, but those who learn to combine so as mutually to support each other, strong and weak alike, for the welfare of the community."

Kropotkin supported this broader interpretation of Darwin's. He even develops it a step further. "As soon as we study animals.....in the forest and the prairie, in the steppe and the mountains--we at once perceive that though there is an immense amount of warfare and extermination going on amidst the various species, and especially amidst various classes of animals, there is, at the same time, as much, or perhaps even more, of mutual support, mutual aid, and mutual defense amidst animals belonging to the same species or, at least, to the same society. Sociability is as much a law of nature as mutual struggle." ⁽²⁾

Kropotkin illustrates mutual aid from ants, bees, crabs, birds and beasts, and concludes that those animals which acquire habits of mutual aid are undoubtedly the fittest. "They have more chances to survive, and they attain, in their respective classes, the highest development of intelligence and bodily organization."

He continues, "In the practice of mutual aid, which we can retrace to the earliest beginnings of evolution, we thus find positive and undoubted origin of our ethical conceptions, and we can affirm that in the ethical progress of man, mutual support,--not mutual struggle--has had the leading part."

This writer believes that Kropotkin is right. As long as men are men there will be a struggle and a certain amount of extermination going on. But the struggle for self-preservation is not man's highest expression. There is a higher law, the law of mutual aid which is another name for cooperation. Man is destined to work out his good with others and not against them. Man achieves spiritually as he abides by this law.

If that is true of man, it is true of his institutions, particularly of the church which claims a divine origin and purpose. We can have churches

(1) Mutual Aid by Kropotkin, 1917. Quotations made with the kind permission of the publisher, Alfred Knopf, New York. (2) Underscoring by M.R.

three churches of one denomination, struggling and dying each for itself, how do you propose to even live with your spirit of independence?

These are but a few of the needs and opportunities that cannot be met by a single church working independently.

II

A second basic conviction which supports cooperation is the fact that by working together churches can achieve better results than they can by working separately.

When, a few years ago, I was called to leave a county after a residence of thirteen years, I made a mental survey of advances in rural church work during that period. The vacation church school movement was first introduced and extended into every corner of the county; week-day classes in Christian instruction had been inaugurated in city, village and country schools. Four larger parishes and several federated churches were started and the religious life of the country districts was looking up. Several ministers had organized a consumers' cooperative society. A regional men's organization was thriving. Is the fact that every one of these things was done on an inter-church basis an indication that some of the best work can be accomplished in that way? I think so.

Some of the results of cooperation are wide in scope. Communities in a spiritual faint, fanned by the refreshing breezes of cooperation have been revived to more vigorous health than ever before. Through cooperation, individuals who had lost hope in the church have received a new personal faith and a revived enthusiasm for Christian service. I can take you to a valley in which church after church was struggling hopelessly, in which there was not a single youth organization, where despair was being written in large letters. That was the old way of individualism. The new way of cooperation has not ameliorated the outward circumstances but it has strengthened faith, and it has substituted hope for despair, and brought wholesome activity where there was little before. One youth who had benefited most said, "All that I am or hope to be is in some way related to this larger parish." It is a well-worn phrase, but true, that churches can do many things together which they cannot do separately. Unbelievably great things can be achieved. In cooperation there is strength.

III

Our third basic conviction is that men and institutions express their best qualities through cooperation and mutual aid rather than through conflict, competition and the struggle for existence.

There is abroad in the world today a philosophy of each for himself and let the devil take the hindmost. Such thinking has a long tradition and it does not take much encouragement to send mankind into a new expression of this old theory. The Hebrews had it in the "eye for an eye" philosophy. Darwin's concept of "struggle for existence," narrowed down more than he ever thought it would be, was made the basis of a philosophy which gives survival to the physically strong, the courageous, the mentally alert. "To the strong, the self-asserting, the aggressive, the superior goes the victory!" As an observation from the biological world it has been taken over as an illustration of how human life operates.

parable. I will share it with you as I have with many others. On a small farm which we purchased, my father found growing along the road fence a number of sizable seedling cherry trees. Since they produced only small, tart cherries neither good for home consumption or for cannery, he engaged a nurseryman to graft them. Royal Anne was the variety he chose. In due season the nurseryman brought his bundles of scions and grafting instruments, and after "beheading" the trees, he carefully grafted each. A few seasons later the new scions blossomed and brought the first crop. Harvesting season came, and one day we went out to pick the cherries. Coming to a certain tree we found an unexpected surprise. On one branch the Royal Anne cherries beautifully yellow with reddish cheeks were ripe and ready to pick. But on another branch were hanging clusters of large, round and, when ripe, firm, black cherries. These were Bing. Other branches were laden with a softer, more pointed, dark red cherry called Lambert. As if to express the old nature of the tree, a few straggling branches displayed small seedling fruit. The nurseryman had mixed his scions and instead of having a uniform tree we had one bearing several varieties, all good, all related to the central trunk.

That was not a profitable tree, commercially. But to me it has been an inspiring tree for it demonstrates clearly the nature of that relation which should exist between Christian people and Christian churches--diverse experiences and expressions centered in one unifying trunk. I believe that, in order to be true to Jesus, churches must establish such a relationship. That is the principle of cooperation, of mutual aid.

We have now sketched four foundation stones on which a philosophy of rural church cooperation may be built. Let us repeat them. The needs and opportunities which present themselves to the rural church are so immense that a church working individualistically cannot answer them effectively. Churches working together can achieve much more in matters of attitudes and relationships, program and service than churches can working singly. One of the highest expressions of which man is capable is to practice cooperation and mutual aid; it is a higher expression than is competition and the struggle for existence. Since the spirit of cooperation and goodwill is at the heart of the Christian faith, in order to be true to it, Christians and churches must have the cooperative spirit. It is the will of God and of Christ that we should cooperate.

Down through the centuries it is the churches which practice this spirit which exemplifies the true essence of the church. See how the cooperative spirit works! To John Frederick Oberlin it means serving all alike in his mountain valley and offering on the communion plate leavened and unleavened bread and wafers so Catholics, Lutherans and Calvinists might choose according to their conviction. See the twelve youthful deacons serving elements at a conference in a church rescued from extinction by a program of inter-church cooperation. Here are four deacons, Presbyterian, Universalist, Congregationalist and Methodist, passing the bread and cup administered by a Baptist, to a congregation of more varied affiliations than themselves. They experience a fellowship and spiritual power denied them in the tottering individualistic churches which had preceded cooperation. Truly, the highest expression of the Christian life is for members individually and through their churches to express the human and divine achievement of cooperation, goodwill and mutual aid. If the church is earnest in seeking a revival or awakening, it need not search further for a gospel. In this New Testament gospel of mutual aid lies the dynamic necessary to give new life to the rural church.